Tips on Selecting an Electronic Health Record

Once a practice has decided to implement an electronic health record (EHR), the next step is to select the best EHR solution. Currently, three of the more widely adopted EHR models are: the application service provider (ASP), the client-server, or the management services organization (MSO). Each solution comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. The practice must assess the strengths and weaknesses of each model to determine which solution will meet its needs. Understanding the type of model will allow the practice to focus on EHR vendors that offer that type of configuration for selection.

Choosing the best EHR model solution

An ASP model allows a practice to access the EHR software from a remote site. Physicians utilize the EHR through an Internet connection to the site that houses the EHR and the patient information. This eliminates the need for an onsite client server by offering a subscription-based, hosted EHR model to the physician. The physician pays a monthly fee instead of having to pay the upfront costs for a client-server solution. The hardware to run the EHR is housed by the ASP who manages the maintenance and support. It allows the physician to access the patient information from any place, at any time with an Internet connection.

The client-server, or standalone, model is where the server that stores the health information is located in the physician office. This is frequently the most costly solution due to the investment in hardware and staff needed to maintain and support the system at the practice. It does provide the practice total control over the data with faster retrieval time as the data is stored at the physician office. The EHR software can also be customized specific to the needs of the practice.

The MSO is a centralized model where practices subscribe, usually on a monthly basis, to a remotely hosted solution, or ASP. Often, MSOs offer multiple EHR products, allowing more options to the practice in choosing a software solution. The MSO solution leverages bulk purchasing and economies of scale, which drive the monthly fees down. Technical support often extends beyond normal business hours. The MSO solution offers all of the benefits of the ASP solution.

All solutions have necessary privacy and security features in their product offerings. Training in the ASP and MSO models and on occasion in the client-server model is usually accomplished on-line, which allows flexibility for the physician's office to schedule the training around the work hours and schedule of the practice. Access to patient files through the Internet can be troublesome if the physician's office has limited Internet capability and speed. The practice should consider having a contingency plan for the patient files in the event that the Internet is unavailable.

Tips for selecting an EHR vendor

Selecting an EHR vendor can seem daunting, yet there are many good articles that provide step by step processes including evaluation forms to assist in the selection. One article published by the American Academy of Family Physicians offers evaluation tools that provide basic steps to consider during the selection process. The article is located on the MHCC website at:
http://mhcc.maryland.gov/electronichealth/ehr/vendors/how%20to%20select%20an%20ehr.pdf.

Another valuable tool is the MHCC's EHR Product Portfolio (Portfolio) located at: http://mhcc.maryland.gov/electronichealth/ehr/cchitehrvendors.html. This Portfolio provides physicians with evaluation and comparison information on approximately 27 EHR products. The Portfolio includes only those vendors who are 2008 Certification Commission for Health Information Technology (CCHIT)-certified and have agreed to offer discount pricing to Maryland physicians. Most of the vendors offer both client server and ASP solutions, while some vendors only offer ASP or client server as a single solution.

Planning is critical in selecting an EHR vendor. A comprehensive and detailed plan will lead to a better selection process. Some key items that should be included in the plan include:

- *Identify the key decision makers for the EHR selection.* The selection team should include a variety of participants who have an impact on EHR implementation. Having a physician champion is best to ensure the practice is committed to the selection and implementation of the EHR. This team should define what you expect the EHR to accomplish for your practice. Ask the question "what types of functionality does the practice need and what is the priority of the functionality desired?" Make sure to allow for changes in workflow. Include a timeline and a budget. Endeavor to remain focused on the plan and goals. It is very important that your practice is committed to the selection and implementation of the EHR to ensure a successful implementation. If there is not a consensus, evaluate and attempt to address the issues.

- *Develop a request for proposal (RFP).* There are many sample RFP templates available on the Internet. The RFP provides background information on your practice and the types of EHR functionalities needed by your staff. By having this RFP, each vendor will respond to the same series of questions which allows for easier evaluation of the vendor responses. Identify the vendors that you want to include in the selection process. There are some basic items to consider that will allow you to minimize your list. Choose vendors that have interfaces to your current practice management system and also ones that offer a product for your practice size. Look at vendor evaluations to see which ones have more favorable ratings.

- *RFP Review process.* Review each RFP response and rank them individually. Have each person on the selection team participate in the review/ranking process. Then compile the answers and narrow the list down to the top two or three vendors. Hold vendor demonstrations and allow the vendors to demonstrate their product. Provide the vendors with typical scenarios that you experience in your day to day practice and include items you would like to see improve. Check at least three references for each vendor. Speak with a variety of people from the reference site, such as a physician, an office manager, and someone on the IT staff to give you a well rounded view of the vendor. Include questions for support, training, implementation, etc.

- *Decision time.* Rank the vendors in order of selection. This is a group ranking to ensure buy in and decision making of the selection team and to help narrow down the selection process to one or two choices. Examples of typical ranking categories are: functionality, total costs, and vendor characteristics. Conduct site visits of practices that use the vendor, choosing ones that

are similar to yours and ask specific questions. Be attentive and watch the flow in the office and how well they use the system. What were the key favored points about the vendor, and what items were least favorable? Select a finalist. It is recommended that you do not notify the other vendors until the negotiation process is complete, in case something becomes unfavorable during contract negotiations, and this will also allow for some leverage during your negotiations. In the event that you do not reach an agreement with the first vendor, you can easily switch to your second choice. Begin contract negotiations and try to include the RFP as part of the contract. Take steps to protect your practice in the event the software business fails, such as putting the software source code in escrow. Contract with a lawyer that is experienced in negotiating with software vendors.

Please feel free to contact Ms. Kathleen Francis, Chief of Health Information Exchange, by phone at (410) 764-5590 or by email at kfrancis@mhcc.state.md.us with any questions you may have regarding the CMS EHR Demonstration Project.